

EXECUTIVEPROFILE

ALL IN

As Nassau County Bar Association president, Elena Karabatos is focusing on inclusion

Elena Karabatos, president of Garden City-based Nassau County Bar Association, joined the organization early in her career. Now a partner at Schlissel Ostrow Karabatos, a matrimonial law firm in Garden City, Karabatos is focusing on inclusion as she leads the bar association during her 2018-19 term. Founded in 1899, the bar association continues to play a critical role in Nassau County, from its charitable arm (the We Care Fund), monthly foreclosure clinics that connect the public to legal resources, and continuing legal education and networking programs for attorneys. The organization is creating new committees and programs to bring value to its members. Karabatos spoke with LIBN about access to justice amid changing demographics and the importance of in-person gatherings in a digital society.

What drew you to law? Helping people. I was always passionate about the advocacy piece of helping the underdog and helping people without a voice.

And why matrimonial law? I felt strongly about helping people in this really difficult time of life ... [and about] helping people with dignity, and empowering them when they feel powerless.

When did you first get involved with the bar association? Twenty years ago. I've been chair of the matrimonial committee and sat on the board of directors and various other committees. Through the years with projects at the bar association, I got more and more involved.

Did your practice in matrimonial law help you as president? A good bar president needs to be able to communicate with all different kinds of people, all kinds of lives ... We have to be able to communicate with all sorts of people.

What are the pressing legal needs of the public? We have monthly foreclosure clinics – it's been terrific and helped all of these families. We're providing [access to] affordable legal services to people in Nassau County. We have pro bono clinics we run twice a year, and bring people with expertise in different areas of the law. They can meet with a lawyer and get information.

What is your mission as president? It is really about the inclusivity of the bar association. [It] helps all sectors of the community. [We] created two committees: a diversity and inclusion committee and an LGBTQ committee. We're reaching out to the public and including all sectors of the population in a changing Nassau County. As the demographics change, we want to make sure to reach out to all of our members and help them. We are also helping lawyers get involved with the bar association, and our charitable arm. We want to give back to the community.

And your mission for the bar association? The mission is to promote access to justice in the local community I will strive to encourage members of the community, especially those who may have been underserved in the past, to use and rely on the Nassau County Bar Association when they have legal problems.

What do you think is the draw for attorneys to attend bar association events, instead of, say, networking through professional social media platforms? It's really important to get people to get together in the physical space of the Nassau County Bar Association. This is the time everyone wants to be on the Internet and social media – but there is nothing like a human connection, a face-to-face meeting. Leave the desk and come to the bar association, which has incredible opportunities to get involved in education and charity. We see it with shopping: Bricks and mortar stores are closing and people stay home

and shop online]. We want the bar association to remain the vibrant place it's been.

Is there something about the physical space at the bar association? It's a wonderful, beautiful building that we call home, that we call domus. [It's a space] to get involved, to get together – people are excited about the energy in the room when you are together in person. The energy is staggering. People start to see the value in that. People come on in and are responding positively.

Can you provide an example? An example is the connections people make when you meet at a CLE course. You start to talk to one another and exchange ideas and information. You put a face to a name [which will help] when you make a phone call in the future. Once you've met someone, you get a sense of them. People are more likely to forge a deeper bond and get to know each other. I see cards exchanging, people talking – it's just different. The Nassau County Bar Association is part of the history of Nassau County. It's a tremendous organization that has so much to offer – from educating other lawyers, community outreach and clinics to our charitable events It's an institution Nassau County should be proud of.

What has been one of the most rewarding aspects of your involvement with the bar association? It's helped me understand the community ... and the importance of giving back – and how every voice matters. You can get involved with the bar association and do good work ... and make a difference, not just individually but through the power of a group. It's not just a group but a group of different lawyers that come at it a little differently with diverse ideas.

Why should people consider law as a career? It's a noble profession, and has always been an important part of society. Having people trained to be good advocates to help people is an important role. And there's a space for everybody and anybody – if you are a writer, like to argue, or [approach the field] from an intellectual level. Even if you don't use a law degree in the most traditional way, there are a million ways you can use it to enhance your future.

What advice do you have for people just starting out in their careers? I didn't understand when I was young how incredible an asset the bar association is for young lawyers. When you are a young lawyer, you don't know where to turn. Lawyers are very helpful. You just have to ask. The bar association is a great resource not just for older lawyers, but equally for young attorneys just starting out.



– ADINA GENN